

# The Genealogy Craze: Authoring an Authentic Identity through Family History Research

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As the second most popular use of the internet, genealogy or family history research has become and is continuing to grow as a widespread, investigative life-writing practice. More than a benign hobby practised in the dusty basements of public archives and libraries, genealogy research is engaged in asking provocative questions about identity, authenticity, history, responsibility, and belonging. However, despite the significant interest in popular genealogy research there has been little academic writing devoted to exploring and analysing the pursuit. Julia Watson's 1996 call to question whether genealogy and autobiography are 'incompatible frames of reference' has gone mostly unheard (316). Surveying texts such as Tom Hayden's memoir *Irish on the Inside: In Search of the Soul of Irish America* (2001) and Bryan Sykes' history/mythology *Blood of the Isles: Exploring the Genetic Roots of our Tribal History* (2006), this interdisciplinary essay seeks to remedy such an absence, by framing genealogical research as an identity-forming intervention into the political present.

**Keywords** genealogy; family history; cultural identity; authenticity

'Family stories make the sentence of our lives present tense'  
(Lane 700)

## The Genealogy Craze: A Provocative Oversight

In recent years, popular interest in genealogy or family history research has flourished. Genealogy research reportedly accounts for the second largest use of the internet, after pornography (Basu 2). There is the vast *familysearch.com*, online home to publicly-accessible, digitised versions of millions of genealogical records and documents, collected and digitised by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and the ever-expanding *genealogywise.com* and *rootsweb.ancestry.com*, social networking sites where people can connect with distant

relatives and exchange their research. These websites are among tens of thousands of personal pages and blogs devoted to family trees, surnames, clans, tribes, local histories, genetic genealogies and celebrity descendants. There has also been a proliferation of genealogy-themed television programmes in the past few years. *Finding Your Roots*, *Faces of America* and *Ancestors in the Attic* have been popular in North America, while *Coming Home* and *Find My Past* are among the offerings in Britain. Australian audiences have seen *Ancestors*, *Can We Help?*, *Find My Family*, *In their Footsteps* and the award-winning *Who Do You Think You Are?*. According to the Australian Archive Association, such shows, inspired by the growing interest in genealogy research, have also gone on to further inspire it, resulting in a significant increase in activity at the state and national archive collections (Yeats).

However, despite the burgeoning interest in family history, there is limited academic literature devoted to the topic. As Tanya Evans argues, 'Family historians have been dismissed by professional and academic historians, in Australia and beyond, as "misty-eyed and syrupy" and their findings and practices deemed irrelevant to the wider historical community' (49–51). Interest in the progress of genealogy research is, however, beginning to emerge. In addition to articles in magazines and newspapers (Hudson and Barrett; Pinker; Coleman), anthropologist Paul Basu's *Highland Homecomings: Genealogy and Heritage Tourism in the Scottish Diaspora* (2007) and geographers Catherine Nash's *Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, & the Politics of Belonging* (2008) and Dallen J. Timothy and Jeanne Kay Guelke's (Eds.) *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts* (2008) remain the key volumes dedicated to this practice. Scholars of public history are becoming interested in the confluence of family history research, identity formation, and cultural memory. Jerome de Groot's *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2009), features a section on genealogy as both a hobby and a science, and a couple of the essays collected in Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller's *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (2011) also broach cultural and memorial aspects of the practice. In the field of life writing specifically, there is a gap between Julia Watson's early 'Ordering the Family: Genealogy as Autobiographical Pedigree' (1996), which attempts to introduce genealogy research as a topic of interest for autobiography and Claire Lynch's recent 'Who Do You Think You Are?: Intimate Pasts Made Public' (2011), which traces the popularity of the aforementioned television programme. The discord between the cultural prevalence of family history research and the academic attention afforded it is enough to justify further study into its social importance. However, the practice is also worthy of investigation because it offers sociological insight into the process of collating a narrative identity, specifically the role that the negotiation between the past and the present plays in this form of life writing, be it in the act of lived identification or written autobiography.

In her pioneering study, Julia Watson describes three of the possible motives for genealogy research: 'validating and authorizing descendancy for membership purposes . . . , inserting the researcher into an insufficiently known past to be enriched by it, and uncovering and articulating an eradicated past as a means of

gaining individual and transpersonal identity' (304–5). These reasons are united by the fact that their journey into the past serves their present. In each case the re-evaluation of family stories is used to place the researcher in a desired identity-role. In this sense, though it appears to be a historical practice, genealogical research is what Lauren Berlant terms 'a presentist genre' (63) an act of 'improvisation' in which a person attunes the genre of their life story to be relevant in the historical or political present, to address the specific social debates of their time (54).

By digging into the past in search of their family stories, genealogy researchers are unearthing provocative insights about the here and now. As Neil Jarman states in his work on the politics of memory, 'It is the desires and aspirations of the present that shape our views of the past...' (5). Drawing on existing studies, in this paper I will demonstrate how genealogy research is being used by both everyday people and autobiographers as a site for negotiating hierarchies of cultural authenticity and the desire for social belonging. I will argue that the reasons family history researchers choose to delve into their ancestry, and more specifically, the selective branches they choose to follow, reflect not only the desire to have an interesting origin story, but to have a story that affirms our desired identities. The cases discussed in this paper demonstrate how the desire for collective affirmation and political relevance often overrides the desire to have a complete picture of one's heritage. Family history research, in this context, is a practice of self-authentication, but also a creative act of revisionist life writing.

### In Search of an Authentic Cultural Identity

Describing a former attitude to family history in Australia, Rosamund Dalziell explains that: 'The tradition of concealing or "forgetting" family history grew from a desire for respectability and a fear of the continuing stigma of convict origins or possible illegitimacy in an earlier generation' (71). The recent popularity of genealogy research suggests a shift from this 'forgetting' (Basu; Waters). In the Western countries where genealogy research is most popular, Australia, the United States, Canada and New Zealand, this trend has been linked to the affects of the post-colonial condition (Basu 40). Dalziell explains that this shift from shame to pride in family secrets is linked with a shift in what qualifies a person as culturally authentic. She suggests that: '[now] status resides not in legitimate birth into a family of high social standing, but in knowing the full and accurate story of one's family... and being able to tell that story, including the rediscovery of forgotten or concealed participants and the reconstruction of repressed narratives' (Dalziell 111).

The shift Dalziell proposes provides a compelling explanation for the recent interest in family history research, though the suggestion that the story must be 'full and accurate' may overlook the more selective elements of this practice. As Catherine Nash argues, genealogy is 'often a practice of self-definition and self-

making, of choosing which apparently determining ancestries matter most' (17). It 'promises a neat and satisfying pre-given collective identity. . . . At the same time, however, it offers the potential pleasures of perhaps unselfconsciously choosing an 'authentic' identity, in identifying, for example, with one surname, clan, or ethnicity among the range in a family tree' (17).

The desire to author a culturally 'authentic' and politically relevant identity is played out in social activist Tom Hayden's recount of his genealogical identification in *Irish on the Inside: In Search of the Soul of Irish America* (2001). Hayden explains that, as a fifth generation assimilated-American, he learned nothing of his Irish heritage from his family. Rather, it was when Hayden was watching television, that he 'saw the marchers in Northern Ireland singing *We Shall Overcome* and, in an epiphany, discovered that [he] was Irish on the inside' (Hayden 4). Hayden discerns that it was his latent Irishness that had led him to gaol in the first place and elicited his passion for civil rights. He explains:

My Irishness was a hidden magnet drawing me towards dreams, underdogs, lost causes, and crusades, to acts of defiance against hopelessness, to the courage of the student movement in the American South, to poets and singers at coffee houses, to women and men wearing shapeless black clothes, to wild and mindless romance, to existentialists and prophets of the absurd (66).

Hayden reflects back on his life, on times when he felt that his thoughts or actions were in some way incongruous, and sees that it was his Irishness that inspired such behaviour. He remembers his apathy over President John F. Kennedy's assassination, which at the time shocked and devastated his friends. Hayden says:

John Kennedy met an Irish fate. Was it an accident or a conspiracy? We may never know, but from an Irish perspective it didn't necessarily matter. Life is not lived until it is understood as a tragedy, said Yeats. . . . In Irish karma, too much success is always a prelude to catastrophe. The event confirmed my opinion . . . that life was absurd. (87).

Hayden muses: 'In pondering these notions of fate, I had no idea how Irish was my soul' (87).

Determined to recover his cultural identity, Hayden immerses himself in Irishness. He is adamant in differentiating himself from 'nostalgic Irish-Americans', who are 'interested in family trees', 'celebrate St. Patrick's Day', 'make self-deprecating jokes', 'believe it is Irish to drink', and visit Ireland as 'tourists' touring historical attractions in the south, but who lack a deeper Irish identity (8). Hayden goes to places where this 'latent consciousness is most manifest': 'where Irish language is spoken, where Celtic spirituality flourishes, where traditional music is played, and where resistance to British rule is a way of life' (7). He reads and re-reads James Joyce, he uncovers the 'closeted Irish identities' of Che Guevara and C. Wright Mills, and under an adopted Irish name, Emmet Garity, (derived from family names), he enrolls in the University of California to study Irish history, and to painstakingly research and record his genealogy.

As Hayden's knowledge of his Irishness grows, so does his commitment. He flies to Ireland to join the IRA, only to be interrogated and sent home before he can leave the airport. Back home, he campaigns for Irish independence. He takes his commitment to his Irishness into every aspect of his life. When his son is born, he names him Troy O'Donovan Garity 'as an act of nostalgia . . . to commemorate' (Hayden 122). Hayden explains that the first part of the name—'Troy'—was taken from 'a young Vietnamese man conspiring to kill U.S. officials . . . whose death was unusually brave, a gesture of sacrifice against overwhelming odds' (122). Hayden explains that Troy was 'lashed to a stake, sentenced to death by firing squad. He asked that his blindfold be removed so that he could face the bullets without fear. He died calling for others to open their eyes' (122). The second part of his son's name, 'O'Donovan', was for 'a militant nineteenth-century Irishman, O'Donovan Rossa, leader of the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood' who led a campaign against the British in 1880 (122). When Troy is three years old, Hayden takes him to Belfast to 'root him in his Irishness' as Hayden 'wished his parents had done' for him (122). Hayden takes Troy to the Sinn Féin office on the Falls Road to meet activists and be directed to some accommodation. They go to stay with 23-year-old Tom, a 'targeted' IRA man, in his flat. There, in the neighbourhood where they stayed, a neighbourhood in which Hayden says there were '180 shooting incidents that month', 'Troy was face to face with his heritage' (132).

In Hayden's genealogical identification the power of desire in shaping evidence and making connections is clearly evident. Like Hayden, genealogists may desire to be on, what they or their social milieu believe to be, the right side of history. The genealogist's navigation of the past is an intervention into their political present. When Hayden asks his 84-year-old great aunt why her generation of the family did not proudly exhibit their Irishness, she replies: 'You know, there wasn't any advantage to being Irish back in my day' (38). But in Hayden's contemporary context his Irishness was advantageous as a means to respect in the civil rights movement. He is no longer a white American, but a politicised 'black' Irishman. Tom Hayden desired a claim to the civil rights narrative of resilience against oppression, and Irishness gave him this. Consequently, Hayden located his Irishness not in a heritage of ruins and famine, but in the radical present of the Troubles. He took his son into a war zone to expose him to his cultural inheritance. Young Troy was not only greeted by his cultural inheritance, but by his father's radical interpretation of it. While genealogy seemingly represents a linear narrative of historical truths collated from events and identities of the past, in reality it is just as reflective of the desires of the present. At a certain point, veracity ceases to be the basis of identification and the desire for identification itself becomes a surprisingly powerful basis for veracity.

### The Contestation of Genealogical Authenticity

Though genealogy can be read as a process of self-fashioning, the creation of a narrative identity is still accountable to social checks. A story is granted

authenticity based on its authors values, but also according to broader social investments. Eakin explains that:

Our participation in what I am calling a narrative identity system is governed by ‘social accountability’: what we talk of as our experience of reality is constituted for us very largely by the already established ways in which we must talk in our attempts to account for ourselves—and for it—to the others around us... and only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate. (25)

As Eakin argues, only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate by our social context. For instance, in genealogical discourse, there is an implicit hierarchy to varying degrees of cultural authenticity, from the native to the expatriate to the fifth generation migrant. In *Highland Homecomings: Genealogy and Heritage Tourism in the Scottish Diaspora*, Paul Basu finds that many returning migrants know much more of Scottish history, culture and even more Gaelic than their born and bred counterparts, but nonetheless, their ‘scottishness’ is still perceived as less valuable, less authentic. To his credit, Basu takes the bold step of disregarding this hierarchy. He argues that: ‘Contrary to the perception which still dominates the Scottish Highlands and Islands, the perspective of the returning migrant is not necessarily less valid or authentic than local perspectives, it is simply different’ (Basu x). However, this negotiation with authenticity can play an influential part in people’s cultural identifications.

In diasporic communities this influence is often profound. In Boston, for instance, there is a popular saying used to describe Irish Americans: ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves’. This saying originates from 1924, when an Irish senator, Patrick Kenny, suggested that: ‘The children of Irish parents born abroad are sometimes more Irish than the Irish themselves’ (Kenny 1). Boston is not the only diasporic heartland where this sentiment is felt. Brian Dooly recasts the experience of growing up as a second generation Irish immigrant in ‘cockney-London’ where he and his siblings were ‘derided by Irish relations as “Plastic Paddies” for not being the genuine article’ (Dooley vii). When it came time to get a passport, Brian and his siblings were forced to choose between English or Irish citizenship. He was inspired by Bobby Sands’ hunger strike, so he chose Irish because it was ‘loaded with political significance’ (vii). Like Hayden, Dooly bases his genealogical identification based on his investments in the political present. Again, this choice also reflects a desire for an authentic affiliation. Dooley reflects: ‘True, we had not been born in Ireland, but we had chosen Ireland in a way that our Kerry cousins had never done, and surely that made us even more Irish?’ (viii).

Paul Basu encountered this battle of authenticity amongst genealogists during his participant-observation work on Scottish interest websites. Basu explains that: ‘Since Scottish-interest discussion lists are open to both homeland and diaspora Scots, these tend to be the lines across which most contests over authenticity are fought’ (Basu 110). Basu demonstrates this by citing a post by a native Scottish subscriber on the SCOTLAND-GENWEB list ‘in response to what he

termed “the inaccurate rubbish” American subscribers had posted on the Highland Clearances’ (110). Basu summarises the Native Scotsman’s post:

‘This posting is going to offend some of you’, he states, before providing a long disquisition on the topic, authenticating his argument with details of his local knowledge of the lands in question and evidence of his critical reading of historic sources. Challenging the diasporic romanticisation of the pre-Clearance Highlands and the demonisation of the English, he writes ‘You are free to subscribe to the “Braveheart” school of Scottish history’, but rhetorically asks ‘Have any of you seen a real black house?... Have any of you actually been to Strathhavner or Strath Halladale? I suggest that before you condemn people you actually see the ground in question’. (110)

There is a clear tone here that demands embodied experience as a requisite for claims to authentic Scottish identity. The use of local knowledge to stake a more authentic identification than the experience of the American Scots was also evidenced in the posting of a Scotswoman ‘exasperated’ by what she called the ‘tartan tomfoolery that masquerades as Scottish culture on the internet’ (Basu 110). She wrote:

I can honestly say I have never read so much crap about clans since I came online, and all of it comes from across the pond. I recently disillusioned a poor soul that there was no such clan as the Clan Hamilton. He insisted there was, but I live five miles from Hamilton and I can bloody well assure you that there is no such clan as Hamilton. It exists only in the minds of Americans. (110)

As Basu argues, identities are being contested in these discussion lists: ‘The discussion list is not merely an arena for the playing out of desires and fantasies, where individuals may perform whatever identities they choose, or lay claim to national histories and cultures without being met by checks and resistance’ (112). Thus while genealogy research is a creative process which involves interpretation, selection, and in some cases fabrication, importantly it is also a practice that takes place within a social community where a genealogist’s desire for an authentic identity is met and perhaps challenged by existing hierarchies.

### Genealogy as a Political Catalyst

In *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (1990), Mary C. Waters reports that Scottish heritage was the least popular at the time of her study. However, if we compare this text to Basu’s there has been a shift in this sentiment. Basu addresses this conclusion in his work on the Scottish diaspora explaining that: ‘Since Waters’ work in the mid-1980s, and thanks to films such as *Braveheart*, and the broader ‘Celtic revival’, Scottish (particularly Highland) identity has, however, been rehabilitated and is no longer associated with the negative stereotypes of Calvinist thrift and dourness’ (Waters 83; Basu 41). As evident in Basu’s study, genealogists have used narratives of the Highland Clearances to the same effect as those in Waters’ study use the narrative of the Irish Famine,

realigning their white identity with the side of the oppressed in post-colonial debates. There is a desire to be on the right side of history. This is not to say such a desire is an appropriation of another's identity. In many cases it is true that the oppressors in a society may also have been, at some prior point, victims of colonialism. The argument that some genealogists' urgent desire for identification is entangled in their experience of living in a post-colonial society is certainly one which could be made. The demographics, placing genealogy as most popular in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, is supportive of this notion (Basu 40).

Cultural theorists such as Rosamund Daziell have made this case, suggesting that the popularity of genealogy is related to shifts in post-colonial identification. As discussed, Daziell describes the particular shift from concealing illegitimate and convict roots as shameful to sharing them as narratives of healing or intrigue (Daziell 71). The desire to use genealogy to make sense of the past *and* the present in post-colonial societies also surfaces in Basu's interviews. Basu suggests that among genealogists of Scottish descent there is a strong use of language associated with contemporary discourses of exile, indigeneity and even genocide (Basu 196, 204). He cites an online post from an American on a Scottish interest website:

In the last 270 years, more than a quarter of a million indigenous people were forced off their ancestral lands, burned out of their homes, sold into slavery, and forcibly assimilated into a foreign culture. But these were not Native Americans, or black Africans, or Jews; these were the white residents of the Scottish Highlands. Their crime: occupying land others coveted. (194)

Basu, displaying a similar diplomacy as Waters, asks us to 'notice how crimes against Highlanders have now escalated to include slavery and forced assimilation' (194). There is a clear use here of language from post-colonial discourse.

British sociologist Anthony Giddens has been very critical of such claims to atrocity, suggesting they are an attempt to deflect responsibility for current post-colonial problems. He argues: 'The construction of a meaningful and morally defensible family history may thus be seen as an ingredient of that broader "project of the self" ... something which has everything to do with contemporary values and predicaments, and arguably little to do with the past it appropriates and presses into service' (75). Certainly, there is a hint of the contemporary psychological rhetoric 'abuse begets abuse' in the following statement from one of Basu's Australian respondents regarding the Warrigal Creek Massacre. She states: 'The Scots settlers' own ancestors were hunted down like animals in the Highlands by the English only 100 years before—is it any wonder that they behaved the way they did?' (206).

However, while Giddens reads these narrations as a desire for apolitical reprieve, it is not clear that all such analogies are an attempt at evasion. Some genealogists may come to understand the indigenous experience of post-colonial identity through the exploration of their own desire for belonging. The testimony of another of Basu's respondents could be read in such a way. Anna, a genealogist from Melbourne explained: 'I have noticed the similarities between what

happened to the Highlanders in the Clearances and what happened to the Australian Aborigines, i.e. a whole load of men in red coats arrive and say “Get off the land, we want to put sheep here!” (Basu 207). We see that this juxtaposition has affected Anna’s negotiation of belonging when she goes on to state that: ‘It’s hard to claim a place here without being aware of who is being displaced by this claim’ (207). Through genealogy Anna is exploring her own family history, but she is also exploring her sense of belonging in her particular political context and this relation affects others. Basu argues that, for someone like Anna: ‘Sensing their own (vicarious) complicity in the violences of colonisation and thus questioning the legitimacy of their right to belong in lands historically appropriated from indigenous populations, the clan provides its diasporic members with the possibility of recovering their own indigenous identity’ (Basu 123). In this context, it is evident that genealogy research is undertaken in direct response to, or association with, a desire to re-evaluate personal, historical narratives in light of a negotiation with post-colonial politics. The adoption of the contemporary nomenclature of exile illuminates the negotiation between the past and the present currently being undertaken by genealogists attempting to come to terms with their ancestral inheritance.

### Fragmentary ‘Authenticity’

Describing the ontology of genealogy research, Nash characterises the family historian as part-archaeologist, part-storyteller. ‘The investigative impulse to recover genealogy’s vital statistics’ she explains, ‘is entangled with the imaginative work of constructing always incomplete family histories from evocative names and dates, fragmentary memories, sketchy stories, and nameless figures in old family photographs, the affective artefacts of family history’ (Nash 17). The metaphors used in the marketing of genealogy research affirm this dual role of the genealogist, in their aim to create a coherent, affective identity narrative with recovered empirical fragments.

Head of the Oxford University Genetics department and founder of the *Oxford Ancestors* genetic genealogy testing company, Bryan Sykes markets his science to the genealogist’s desire for a verifiable mythology. In *Blood of the Isles: Exploring the Genetic Roots of our Tribal History*, Sykes is careful not to lose the profundity of genealogy (and his mainstream audience) amongst all the genetic terminology. Whereas, Sykes describes the two main processes of tracing genetic genealogy—along the matrilineal genealogy through mitochondrial DNA, and along the patrilineal line through Y-chromosome Nuclear DNA—he does so in a way which presents DNA as ancient artefacts and their mutations as biogeographical pilgrimages and conquests. In fact, Sykes calls himself a genetic archaeologist. He explains that:

[In his research, a gene] is a fragment, like a piece of pottery or a flint tool. And just as reliant on the twin necessities of survival and discovery as any

archaeological remains. This is how I would build the genetic history of the Isles, by sifting through the thousands of fragments, trying to make sense of them. I would treat them as if they were the scattered shards of broken pottery and do what I could to understand what they meant. (115)

This rhetoric has been very lucrative for Sykes' company—which reported a one million dollar profit in 2008, up 10-fold from its founding year in 2000 (Baker 1). Sykes has pragmatically based his research and company on a winning combination of genetics, history, and myth. He takes, what to the general reader would be dry scientific data, and turns it into origin stories drawing from legends and ancient history. One example is his *Seven Daughters of Eve* project which argued that all people could be traced back to seven clan mothers. The result, as Sykes explains, was that his 'laboratory was overwhelmed by requests from all over the world from people who wanted to know from which of these women they were themselves descended' (106).

Sykes marketing is clever, because it draws upon positive metaphors of genealogy. It may be another testament to Sykes pragmatism that he recognises a post-colonial impulse in genealogy. Sykes claims to present people with their 'tribal history'. His company's genealogy reports tell those with 'the blood of the isles' that their past is with the mysteries of King Arthur and Norwegian Vikings. There is an obvious omission of the more negative narratives of colonial expansion and imperialism. What this selectivity demonstrates is that a genetic reading of identity is just as susceptible to people's desires and retrospection. It is worth a reminder that Sykes is not a pseudo-scientist; he is the director of the genetics department at Oxford, one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Even in the highest echelons of scientific analysis there is still the presence of the desire to be politically relevant; or at least the recognition that science can serve this desire. Evidence in this case becomes almost perfunctory as a means to the coherency and continuity needed to support a desired narrative. As Sykes himself explains: 'The career of a myth depends far less on its factual accuracy than on its congruence with contemporary political ambition, and the fervour with which people believe it' (43).

Water's *Ethnic Options* provides further evidence of the malleability of genealogical evidence. When researching how people answered the ancestry question on the 1980 American census, Waters found that, when probed, people who presented a strong cultural identification often struggled to provide the evidence upon which this identification was based. Waters noticed that while most people displayed some knowledge about their ancestors' immigration to America or at least subsequent family stories, others had derived their identification from their family's 'surname and looks' (Waters 64). Others still, predicated their identity on the display of stereotypical personality traits and tastes, such as the presence of 'an Irish sense of humour' (50). Fourth-generation American, 26-year-old lawyer Dan Burke, explained to Waters that his Irish identification was derived from family names: 'My grandfather's name was Dion, which was very Irish, and that is also my eldest uncle's name, and so that is why I

have an Irish impression: a lot of the names seem Irish. I know Dion is. Ivan, I don't know if that's Irish, I think it is' (72). In response to this, Waters diplomatically concedes the possibility of what seems a fairly implausible notion, suggesting that: 'It may in fact be true that his relative Ivan is Irish, but there is no necessary connection there' (72). It appears from his response to Waters that he has put little, if any, rigour into evaluating the evidence upon which his Irish identity is based. In the case of Dan Burke, we see that the basis of his Irish identification rests most firmly on his desire to be Irish.

What Waters ultimately found in her interviews with American census respondents was that: 'Far from being an automatic labelling of a primordial characteristic, ethnic identification is, in fact, a dynamic and complex social phenomenon' (16). Waters reported that people's identification was in a constant 'state of flux', often changing from interview to interview as new information or considerations surfaced (23). She also found elements of preference and selectivity within people's answers, influenced by both their own opinions of ethnicity and what they felt to be the opinions of others. Waters suggests that: 'In general, people neither insist on naming all of their ancestries nor just call themselves American. Most pick and choose' (20). Waters' argues that Irish and Italian ethnicities were the most popular choice because they were the most established, organised, recognisable and assimilated 'white ethnic' groups in the United States at this time, and that the Irish particularly had an authentic claim to contemporary notions of a minority having overcome adversity (162).

Like Dan Burke, Hayden founded the basis of his desired identity on the precariousness of a name. In an Irish genealogy text given to him by a friend, Hayden finds the name Peter Hayden listed among those present at the 1798 United Irish uprising, 'in which 30,000 were slaughtered' (Hayden 69). Hayden was unable to officially link himself to this man, but he claimed him as an ancestor nonetheless. Hayden suggests: 'Where the trail of evidence disappears, where intellect fails, one must rely on imagination, on possibilities that are technically unprovable' (69). Acknowledging his overruling desire for connection, he admits: 'An identical name—Peter Hayden—is trace evidence, nothing more. But it is a tantalising alternative to imagining nothing at all' (69). It is trace, which in satisfying Hayden's desired identity-narrative, escapes rigorous scrutiny. At a certain point, the imperative of veracity is eclipsed and need to know one's family history or origin narrative rests on the desire for a contemporary social connection. Genealogy serves the modern subject's need to, as Charlotte Linde explains, have 'a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story' in 'order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person' (Linde in Eakin 29).

### Genealogy and Autobiography

Concluding her study of archival genealogy research, Watson leaves her reader with the question of whether genealogy and autobiography are 'incompatible

frames of reference' (316). Considering this juxtaposition, both genres, equally balanced on the precarious cusp between evidence and interpretation, can be seen as forms of contemporary life writing. The desire to draw together an illustrative origin story and a socially readable identity is vital to genealogy and autobiography, and indeed to narratives that integrate both genres. Contemporary examples of memoir provide further evidence of the role of family history fragments in identity-creation. In the introduction to *Dreams from My Father*, for instance, Barack Obama explains that his writing became more autobiographical than intended as he began to remember 'the stories that [his] mother and her parents told [him] as a child'. '[T]he stories', he says, 'of a family trying to explain itself' (xiv).

These iterations of his family's past centre him in his family's, and then his own, political present. Obama suspects that stories told to him about a Kenyan father he barely knew were 'less about the man himself than about the changes that had taken place in the people around him, the halting process by which [his] grandparent's racial attitudes had changed' (25). He explains that: 'The stories gave voice to a spirit that would grip the nation in that fleeting period between Kennedy's election and the passage of the Voting Rights Act: the seeming triumph of universalism over parochialism and narrow mindedness, a bright new world where differences of race or culture would instruct and amuse and perhaps even ennable' (25). The stories came to be told to Obama like fables, fables of hope. Obama adds that he does not really blame his mother or his grandparents for this. For so it is that history is made: in dialectic between our memory of the past and our desires of the present. Obama recognises that the projections of our desires onto history are not without power even if they may be without truth. The stories we create, or that others create for us, forge our identities. They are generative. While Obama understands that his family's stories were shaped by his family's dreams, he also recognises that he 'now [occupies] the place where their dreams had been' (27). This oral genealogy, regardless of its empirical truth-value, is generative of his political identity.

The family stories passed down to Obama become 'a useful fiction', one which 'haunts [him] no less than it haunted [his] family' (25–6). In his hands the stories must again be re-evaluated, reread, retold. The stories must be told in relation to the context of Obama's life and time, one different from the context that influenced his grandparent's telling. Obama explains that as he grew up he learned 'to distrust his childhood and the stories that shaped it' (xv). Like Basu's Scottish diasporans, the need to retell his story took him back to his origins, his homeland, along genealogical lines in search of the truth; a truth that made sense to him, here and now:

It was only many years later, after I had sat at my father's grave and spoken to him through Africa's red soil, that I could circle back and evaluate these early stories for myself. Or, more accurately, it was only then that I understood that I had spent much of my life trying to rewrite these stories, plugging up holes in the narrative, accommodating unwelcome details, projecting individual choices

against the blind sweep of history, all in hope of extracting some granite slab of truth upon which my unborn children can firmly stand. (xvi)

In Obama's words, we hear the desire for a coherent narrative identity, for a story that is exceeds the truth, a narrative which fills in the gaps and reflects a stable and honest identity. We want to know the genealogical lines to our origins, but we also want those lines to chart a trajectory back to ourselves that in some way reflects who we think we are; that positions us somewhere we want to belong.

Obama also captures how, in genealogy research and autobiography alike, we not only reread history, but rewrite it. To reconcile the gaps within our identity stories we weave new narratives. Our place and time in history, like Obama's grandparents and then his own, have a role in determining how we will reread and rewrite our family stories. History is always open to retelling. In fact, its generativity demands it. As deconstructionist Barbara Johnson argues in her work on 'the art of rereading': 'The rhetorical subversion of theory by its own discourse does not... prevent it from generating effects; indeed, it is precisely the way theory misses its target that produces incalculable and interesting effects elsewhere' (Johnson xii). This explanation is as fitting for genealogical research as it is for academic revision. It is in the authorship of an origin story that the past addresses the present, even if in the translation certain things are lost and gained.

This fragmentary, bricolage approach to family history need not be less authentic than a meticulously recorded pedigree. As archaeologist Leslie Van Gelder explains: 'The act of remembering is the antithesis of dismembering as we literally put back together that which is fractured' (142). In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie explains that when he first returned to Bombay, his 'lost city', after an 'absence' of something like 'half his life', his nostalgia and curiosity lead him to return to his family home. Rushdie says that it was at this point, standing before his old home comparing it with a black and white photograph, that he 'realised how much he wanted to restore the past to [his] self' (Rushdie 9–10). However, Rushdie doubts the possibility of reconnecting to an authentic origin in a holistic, untainted sense:

If we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we are not capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

Contrary to a possible reading of his conclusion as the impossibility of authenticity, Rushdie goes on to draw out the idea that this seemingly 'inauthentic' position is in fact an authentic position within itself. He suggests that while the 'Indian writer who writes from outside India is obliged to deal in broken mirrors... whose fragments have been irretrievably lost', there is a paradox, in that 'the broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed' (11). Rushdie explains that, like Obama, it was exactly

the fragmentary nature of his history, the gaps in the truth, which enlivened the passion of his identification and relation between his existing identity and his ever-illuminating past. Obama set about ‘plugging up holes in the narratives’ of his family stories because he was wary of a fractured mirror, fearful it was not enough to reflect a secure identity for his children (xvi). But as he explains, it was when he embraced the fragmentary nature of his evidence and followed the genealogical clues home, that he was able to piece together his own story.

Like Obama and Rushdie, Canadian short story writer Alice Munro was inspired later in life to return to the land of her forebears: Ettrick Valley, Scotland. In this time she ‘began to take more than a random interest in the history of one side of [her] family, whose name was Laidlaw’ (Munro ix). Living in Ettrick Valley, Munro began to compile the family history of the Laidlaws. She explains that she ‘put all this material together over the years, and almost without [her] noticing what was happening, it began to take shape itself, here and there, into something like stories. Some of the characters gave themselves to [her] in their own words, others rose out of their situations’ (iix). The process by which Munro says she came to rewrite her family stories into fiction captures the way in which all genealogists rewrite their family stories. As Munro adds, the stories are a mixture of her words and her ancestors words, ‘a curious recreation of lives, in a given setting that was as truthful as our notion of the past can ever be’ (iix). Munro’s method, mixing interpretation and evidence, captures the process by which genealogists, not just those with renowned literary finesse, reread and rewrite their family stories.

The popular practice of family history research illustrates the overwhelming influence a desire for belonging and political relevance has over the way we choose to author our life histories. The re-evaluation of family stories is an intervention into both a particular and fluid present. The provocations of Scottish and Irish descendants, for example, particularly in their relation to the dispossessed indigenous populations in the post-colonial countries in which they now live, or their interest in understanding their own post-colonial histories, open up socially imperative questions about the ongoing difficulty and problematised belonging caused by such socio-historical events. So too, in the marketing of genetic and mythical fragments and the memoirist’s negotiation of oral or archival shards, can we see that collating a genealogical narrative is a generative identity-practice, a social project of the self. Genealogy research as a life-writing practice is worthy of further academic consideration, for the insight it can give us into people’s authorial negotiations with both the political present and the enduring life of the past.

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